Venus’s Bush(es)
Lizz Angello

ON THE CORNER OF MY OFFICE LAPTOP PERCHES A SMALL SHRUBBERY made from extruded plastic: LEGO greenery, fashioned into a wedge of landscape to obscure the tiny LEGO TARDIS resting over the power button.

My young son has been here.

He clearly meant for his ersatz foliage to cover up the time machine, but it actually calls attention to it. It signals that something must be hiding there, something we are meant to find. “Look, look!” say the bushes, “but pretend you aren’t looking.” Real flora can function similarly, as when leaves in a bouquet direct our eyes away from unsightly stems and toward colorful blooms. But curious pedestrians also peer through hedges at the houses behind them. Does a bush conceal, then, or only pretend to conceal? Is a bush an actant or an alibi, like the pasties on Barthes’ strip- pers, the conceit of privacy serving only to heighten the eroticism of the hidden?1 Perhaps we can’t even speak of “a bush” but rather “bushes.” Bushes are messy, insistently plural; yet they can be tended and tamed into the very embodiments of b/order, separation, and singularity. Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* bears witness to the multivalence of bushes, suggesting that they contain all of these possibilities—and more—within their interlace.

My consideration of the bushes in *Venus and Adonis* is thus appropriately both messy and linear, tracing a complex network but firmly rooted in questions of gender(ing). In much of his work, Shakespeare binds genitalia and identity, often along traditionally gendered lines (as when Lear strips naked to find that he has become “the thing itself”)

but also occasionally along transgendered ones (as when Hamlet finds his masculine identity in his father’s ring). Much of the critical attention paid to the poem justifiably argues that it reverses the expected gender dynamic, especially in Venus’s usurpation of the masculine roles of wooer/hunter/objectifier and Adonis’s occupation of the passive, reluctant position. However, Venus’s “bush/es,” both anatomical and floral, help us to see the goddess’s abundant femininity throughout the poem and insist that we read her actions as not only acceptable but also desirable.

As Heather Dubrow has observed, *Venus and Adonis* departs from other Renaissance *epyllia* partially in its lack of engagement with the pastoral mode, especially in the poem’s relative dearth of landscape description. The pastoral typically expends a great deal of energy creating its Arcadia, but Shakespeare picks up mid-conversation in a non-descript and non-specific location. What we do know of the titular couple’s surroundings is that they are lush with leafy things, from the grasses that support Venus’s weight to the thickets skirting the forest. In other words, we don’t see much, but what we do see is largely green—and all of it is in bloom, which accords with Venus’s status as the embodiment of love and fertility. It turns out that the poem does not eschew the pastoral landscape so much as displace it onto Venus: we get more than one eyeful of her hills and valleys.

In the most famous of her linguistic peep-shows, Venus blazons herself, acting the early modern love poet since Adonis refuses. Playing on the homophones “dear” and “deer,” she constructs herself as a “park” in which he should graze. If those hills be dry,” she says of her lips, “Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.” If he continues this downward trend, she tells him, he will find her “sweet bottom-grass” and “brakes obscure and rough” (233–34, 235–36). Although “bush” as common parlance for female pubic hair would not take root for a couple of centuries, this passage clearly allies her nether-hairs with foliage. Elsewhere, Shakespeare forges links between hair (if not specifically pubic hair),

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4 “Bush, n., 1,” *OED*. Eric Partridge catalogs the many other euphemisms for female pubic hair and genitalia more generally (including this poem’s “brakes” and “hill,” plus “leaves,” “flower” or “rose,” “river” or “pond,” and, once, “withered pear”) in his encyclopedic *Shakespeare’s Bawdy* (New York: Routledge, 1968), esp. 24–26.
flowers and leaves, and vitality, writes Edward J. Geisweidt, citing examples from *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The association crops up all over early modern literature, philosophy, and medical discourse, and Geisweidt identifies its sources in the Aristotelian doctrine of the vegetative soul and the Galenic tradition of describing bodies as landscapes. Thus, when Venus figures her pudendum as a “green world,” we should understand such travel as natural and life-giving. And although she certainly behaves in ways traditionally coded in early modern poetry as “masculine” (the viewer, the poet, the hunter, and the aggressor), she does so only in order to focus Adonis’s (and our) attentions on her female body: her hills, fountains, and especially her sweet bottom.

If Venus is a park, then the park is also Venus: all bushes are her bushes. The sympathy between living things and goddess means that even her massive form barely registers on the grass beneath her: “Witness this primrose band whereon I lie; / These forceless flowers like sturdy trees support me” (lines 1551–52). Despite her prodigious size, she trips like a fairy and dances like a nymph without making footprints in the sand (lines 146–48); she flies through the air pulled by “two strengthless doves” (line 153). Her form and weight cannot burden the plants and animals because she is consonant with them. Regardless of how we must cringe at her blindness to Adonis’s terror during her campaign of seduction, the poem repeatedly invites us to think of all love and desire as natural.

To illustrate this point, another of Venus’s bushes (one not attached to her “ivory pale”) parts to reveal “a breeding jennet, lusty, young, and proud” (260). She spots Adonis’s courser, who immediately “breaketh his rein” to join her in an elaborate parody of Petrarchan courtship that even Venus pauses to admire. Capitalizing on the moment, Venus explains to Adonis that her union with him would be as natural as his courser’s with the jennet: “Thy palfrey, as he should,/welcomes the warm approach of sweet desire. [...] Therefore no marvel though thy horse be gone” (lines 385–86, 390; emphases mine). The horses’ “lesson is but plain,” she says, and in this sense, we must understand Adonis’s abstinence as unnatural.

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Venus admits as much when she describes him as a “statue,” and a “thing like a man, but of no woman bred” (line 214). We might be tempted to read this as sour grapes, were it not for the scene that we just witnessed emerging from a nearby bush. The greenery and the horses mating within it extend Venus’s body to instruct the youth of his natural duty.

Tragically, of course, Adonis fails to heed the steed’s instruction or Venus’s warnings against hunting the boar, and we discover the most revealing bushes in a copse of myrtles that tear at Venus as she pursues her beloved into the forest. These brambles perform her growing sense of dread: “And as she runs, the bushes in the way/Some catch her by the neck, some kiss her face,/Some twine about her thigh to make her stay” (871–73).\(^7\) As Lisa Starks-Estes explains, the bushes tread the same path of dominance and submission as Venus, caressing and kissing her face and neck like a lover and embracing her thighs in exactly the same tender-but-unbreakable “twining” that she earlier exercised on Adonis. The bushes delay her progress but ultimately cede to her passion, belying her inner conflict: like anyone en route to witness a horror they know exists, Venus is both desperate to confirm the atrocity with her own eyes and desperate to never see such a thing. Starks-Estes reads the myrtle as part of “an animated botanical world with bushes and trees that wish to ravish her.”\(^8\)

I would add that, around Venus, all things wish to ravish something: she is the animating principle of this verdant world.

If we linger among these myrtles that are, like Venus, part lover and part attacker, and we perhaps practice the “slow looking” that some art historians currently advocate, they reveal all sorts of secrets, bound to one another in a dense copse of associations between Venus’s vegetal and anatomical bushes.\(^9\) Pliny the Elder explains that the Romans cel-

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\(^7\) The phrase “to make her stay” also appears in *The Rape of Lucrece*, when a parallel group of agentive objects seeks to prevent an unnatural wrong. Lucrece’s house comes to life to defend her against Tarquin, her would-be rapist, as he sneaks down the hallways toward her room. One of the agents, a gust of wind, “wars with his torch to make him stay” (311). For a more extended discussion of Lucrece’s domestic agents, see my article “Moving Like a Ghost: Tarquin’s Specter and Agentive Objects in *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth*,” *Forum* 7 (Autumn 2008).


ebrated Venus with myrtle crowns during pre-marriage ceremonies and with drinks meant to stimulate female desire. They also planted myrtle alongside shrines to Venus, especially the Etruscan-Roman hybrid goddess Venus Cloacina; one chapel, dedicated to the lesser-known Venus Murcia, stood behind an entire grove of the bushes. In her guise as Venus Cloacina, she presided over Rome’s Great Sewer, the Cloaca—a term which became synonymous with “vagina,” as an opening for drainage and cleansing. Biologists still use the term when speaking of reptiles and birds, who have a single orifice for evacuation and reproduction. The Greeks employed various forms of the word μυρσίνη to name female genitalia: myrton, or “myrtle-berry” meant “clitoris,” while myrtos, the whole myrtle-bush, meant “vulva.” The earliest recorded usage of these terms appears in the anatomist Rufus of Ephesus’s treatise on the parts of the body, but they continue well into at least the nineteenth century in English medical dictionaries. The meaning, though not exceedingly well-attested in formal medical documents, was common enough for a captain in Aristophanes’s Lysistrata to insist that he will “bury [his] sword in the myrtle-bush” (line 631). Later in the same play, a Spartan herald complains that “the women won’t let us anywhere near their myrtle-bush” (line 1004). Since Latin acquired the loan word murtos for myrtle, it is possible that its anatomical connections came with it. Through this thorny word- and idea-play, the myrtle bushes present themselves as active parts of Venus’s femininity and sexuality.

Venus’s bushes fail to conceal Adonis’s mutilated body, but they successfully reveal his arboreal origins. Both homophonically and etymologically, myrtle points to myrrh, another fragrant flowering bush, although one that tastes decidedly bitter rather than sweet. Both stem from the same

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12 Aristophanes’s Greek uses μυρσίνη, or “myrtle,” in conjunction with the word for “shrub” or “stick,” in both instances, with clearly salacious intent. Translators working in both English and modern Greek, however, often eschew the innuendo in the first quotation, rendering it more literally along the lines of “I will wrap my sword in a myrtle wreath,” connoting the plant’s association with victory crowns. The second quotation retains its erotic overtones, but loses its floral associations in favor of another euphemism for female genitalia.
Semitic root (in Arabic, *murr*; in Hebrew, *mor*), but more importantly for this poem, the myrrh tree reaches out to Shakespeare’s Ovidian source.13 The tale immediately preceding the story of Venus and Adonis in the *Metamorphoses* explains how a woman named Myrrha fell in love with her own father and, after deceiving him into an illicit romance, became pregnant with his child. (In some versions of the story, Myrrha’s mother boasted of her daughter’s beauty, comparing her favorably to Venus, who punished Myrrha with her forbidden desires.) In shame, Myrrha hopes to die but is dissuaded by her nurse; turning instead to the gods, Myrrha prays to be hidden from human sight and so transforms into a myrrh tree. Nine months later, she delivers a beautiful boy named Adonis. Perhaps, then, we can see what Venus cannot: Adonis grows up to shun Venus’s advances and reject her argument that sex and reproduction are nature’s mandate because his experience has taught him otherwise. Shakespeare conceals the youth’s roots, but the myrtle calls out for us to attend to them and incorporate his shameful birth-story into our reading of its next installment.

Venus’s bush reveals the disorder, the mess, the chaos inherent in love and sexual desire, but to what end? One answer lies in the myrtle’s final revelation. Shakespeare conspicuously conceals the tale’s Ovidian narrator rather as the LEGO bushes on my computer pretend to conceal the TARDIS. In the *Metamorphoses*, both Myrrha’s and Adonis’s stories are narrated by Orpheus, who literally moves his audience of stones and humans-cum-trees with his song, his gift animating nature as Venus’s presence does in Shakespeare’s adaptation. Orpheus sings of evil, fallen women and innocent, beautiful young boys—a milieu into which *Venus and Adonis* comfortably fits; in removing this frame, Shakespeare recasts the story, making Adonis’s insistence on the dangers of desire feel misplaced, as evidenced by his particularly grisly end. The obvious homoerotic cast of Adonis’s death works even more powerfully in contrast to what Venus offers. Boars are dangerous, the goddess argues, but she really means that *men* are dangerous: she has no problem with Adonis hunting rabbits (though she paints such a tender and tragic portrait of poor Wat that one wonders how anyone could kill a rabbit after hearing it), but the threat of the boar’s phallic tusks proves too much for her to bear.

That Adonis dies from a vicious tusk to his lily white flank (line 1055) suggests that Venus rightly argues against the homosocial culture this

13 “Myrrh, n., 1,” *OED*. 
particular enterprise represents: the masculine hunt, furtively ensconced in the trees, ends with sterile, fatal intercourse, while the feminine hunt takes place on the open meadow and promises fertility and immortality. Adonis, however, insists that he must remain within this group because he is too young to pursue the love of a woman: “Fair queen […] if any love you owe me, / Measure my strangeness with my unripe years: / Before I know myself, seek not to know me” (lines 524–26). The reflexive phrase “know myself” might easily contain “know others like myself”; only when he has gained this key experience, has known other men, will he look outside his fraternity and consider a heteronormative relationship.

If we consider this argument alongside Venus’s rejoinders that reproduction is natural, that the beautiful owe the earth continuance of their beauty, and that children offer a kind of immortality to their parents, we can see Shakespeare building a familiar case. Venus sounds very much like the speaker of the first sonnet group, who argues so eloquently that “from fairest creatures we desire increase” and that a “fair child” can “sum a count and make an old excuse,” while Adonis provides the second voice in the conversation. *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and the sonnets were all dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton, and while much scholarly speculation has attended to possible connections between Wriothesley and the sonnets, not much has included the narrative poetry. Patrick Murphy, a notable exception, has convincingly argued that Shakespeare intended *Venus and Adonis* as a message to the young man, who had recently backed out of his engagement to Elizabeth Vere and would not marry again for six years, at the age of 25. Murphy’s article stops short, however, of promoting a positive reading of Venus’s seduction of Adonis, which I believe the poem encourages, despite the consternation that her pursuit causes him. As badly as we might feel for him, plucked from his horse and pinned beneath her gargantuan arms, and as silly as Venus’s histrionics might seem, when Adonis rejects her to join his male friends, he meets a brutal and unmistakably homoerotic end.

After Adonis dies, he joins the feminine, floral economy of the poem. First we learn that, as the myrtle echoed Venus’s inner turmoil, the plants mirror Adonis’s pain: his wound “weeps” with “purple tears,” and “no flower was nigh, no grass, herb, leaf, or weed, / But stole his blood and

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seem’d with him to bleed” (lines 1056–58). Even Venus responds to this “solemn sympathy,” and she begins attempting to vocalize her trauma. During her laments, she envisions all the world bowing before Adonis’s beauty, including “some hedge,” which hid a lion behind it so the beast would not frighten the youth; like Orpheus, Adonis in Venus’s imagina-
tion tames the tiger when he sings and coaxes the wolf from the sheep’s pasture. The boar only gored him, she reasons, because it did not see his face: “This foul, grim, and urchin-snouted boar,/ Whose downward eye
still looketh for a grave,/ Ne’er saw the beauteous livery that he wore” (lines 1107–09). Finally, the effect of her words of woe is such that Adonis “melted like a vapour from her sight,” turning instead into a fragile flower. Plucking it (the goddess gets her quarry at last!), Venus tucks the stem between her breasts in the embrace of both a lover (subject to her constant kissing) and a mother (subject to her constant rocking). He becomes, in the end, yet another of Venus’s bushes.